The Impact Of Mental Health On People From Different Eras In The Hours (1998) And Macbeth (1606-1607)

Both ‘The Hours’ (1998) and ‘Macbeth’ (1606-1607) present the impact of mental health on people from different eras. In comparing Shakespeare’s play about a man and women who become mad due to their guilt from killing multiple people and Cunningham’s novel about a group of women who live in different eras and the challenges they face due to their mental illness. I will be looking at how various readers and audiences might interpret them and the impact of mental illness in each text.

Within the play, madness is a significant theme used by Shakespeare to demonstrate Macbeth’s evolution to the audience. He advances from being a respectful, valiant, noble man to a sinful, nihilistic murderer who feels guilty from his deeds after committing the act- Duncan’s death. Macbeth’s fall from grace is typical of a tragedy. His hamartia resulted in him going from a brave and valiant protagonist to an evil and sinister antagonist. Like Macbeth, who only becomes guilty and fearful after being evil and violent, Lady Macbeth also develops from being powerful and masculine to being characterised as weak and regretful. This is demonstrated when she says, “to bed to bed; there’s a knocking at the gate” (p.92). In the beginning of the play, Lady Macbeth is portrayed as an assertive, strong-willed wife with the ability to dictate her husband (she was the one who told Macbeth to kill Duncan; manipulated him into partaking in such a sinful act). But this demonic and evil side of Lady Macbeth developed throughout the play gets destroyed due to guilt. This is conveyed through the idea of madness as she is unable to have restful sleep and sleepwalks instead. When Lady Macbeth sleepwalks, she talks as well. This is her subconscious self and it reveals her true thoughts and feelings.

Alternatively, in ‘The Hours’ we do not see the deterioration of Virginia Woolf’s sense of self and sanity. Rather the novel commences with the final moments of her life. It could’ve been structured this way so that we are able to immediately acknowledge how quickly mental health can lead to the demise of an individual. Cunningham could’ve also done this to immediately grasp us into the novel allowing us to concentrate on why Virginia is committing suicide and what is the driving force of her suicide. She has decided to take her own life as she has decided to reject her mental illness because she believes that she is relapsing into an illness that once threatened her sanity and her own self-worth. This is demonstrated using a third person narrative which prevents us from capturing Virginia’s internal thoughts. When it refers to,: “she failed, and now the voices are back and the headache is approaching as surely as rain, the headache that will crush whatever she is and replace her with itself” (p.4). This excerpt from ‘The Hours’ provides the reader with the information that Virginia Woolf is not in the best state of mind. Virginia’s realisation that her mind is deteriorating to the rate allows the reader to infer that she is suffering from a mental illness as we can clearly see that she has begun to hallucinate. One can infer from the extent of these hallucinations the mocking voices that cause her such internal pain is probably that of a schizophrenic disorder. This is also perfectly demonstrated through Virginia’s thought,:” the devil is a headache; the devil is a voice inside the wall; the devil is a fin breaking through waves” (p.157) which reinforces the amount of pain she’s feeling. This use of stream of consciousness enables the audience to clearly see that Virginia his mentally ill; she talks about the devil as if they’re around; alive. Due to Virginia living in the 1930s Virginia the reader can also feel her pain and confusion of this illness as medicine

was not as advanced, so she has absolutely no idea what is happening to her. It is this fact that helps the reader comprehend her choices and decisions within the story barely. Virginia Woolf doesn't find peace until she commits suicide; by avoiding life she was unable to experience peace; by avoiding life she could not understand life, which resulted in her mental agony.

Macbeth's insanity once is clearly shown after he kills Banquo. The iambic pentameter used in the line "Is this a dagger which I see before me?" (p.49) which shows that he is under the influence of Lady Macbeth and the witches and that his internal struggle may be driving to the edge of sanity. The feminine ending of the phrase could be a versified reinforcement of Macbeth's uncertainty at suddenly seeing the vision of a dagger. Also, he is seeing a non-existent dagger, which is a clear sign of hallucination. The quote, "mine eyes are made fools o'th'other senses" (p.49), shows he knows that he's mad and his eyes are playing tricks on him and deceiving his other senses. As well as saying "Or art thou but a dagger of the mind" (p.49), which suggests that he isn't sure what is real and what is fake and therefore is questioning everything. Lady Macbeth is unable to be peaceful due to the part she played in Duncan's death. Instead of stepping forward and admitting that she played a part in Duncan's death she has decided to die with guilt and suffer until she dies.

In contrast, in 'The Hours' Laura Brown commit suicide instead, she leaves her family. She metaphorically dies to her family. Laura fails to find peace as she is constantly trying to find ways to leave her family; she unable to physically face her family- tell her husband exactly how she's feeling. But she also fails to mentally face herself. Had she told her husband how she was feeling maybe her pain and suffering would've been a little bit easier to deal with. She opts to commit suicide because of her physical tie to her baby. Cunningham uses a mixture of short simple sentences and long complex sentences to portray the character's thoughts and to depict the characters' environment. He also uses parallelism to create a sense of rhyme and order as well as to add emphasis to the characters' feelings. This is shown when she says,: "She takes the bottle off the shelf, holds it up to the light. There are at least thirty pills inside, maybe more. She puts it back on the shelf It would be as simple as checking into a hotel room. It would be as simple as that. Think how wonderful it might be to no longer matter. Think how wonderful it might be to no longer worry, struggle, or fail. What if that moment at dinner—that equipoise, that small perfection—were enough? What if you decided to want no more?" (p.214) which helps to give us an insight of Laura's thoughts as we are seeing exactly how she's thinking.

In 'Macbeth' when Lady Macbeth says,: "here's the smell of blood still" (p.92) in Act 5 Scene 1, it is a key part of the play as it demonstrates how her ambition for power has resulted in her tragic downfall. As long as she washes her hands the blood remains. This is because she is becoming mad and is starting to hallucinate due to her guilt of the death of Duncan; she's experiencing sleepless nights and demonic powers. This scene depicts how little people know about mental illness. Also, when she mentions,: "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" (p.92), which implies that nothing, not even perfumes of Arabia, can take away the stench of death on her hands. The use of blood in Macbeth plays a crucial role that is easily overlooked regarding mental illness that represents guilt, guilt Macbeth and Lady Macbeth murdering Duncan and the others.

Laura's changeful and unexplainable character is seen normal for someone who has a mental illness as we can recognise immediately that she has a mental illness. For instance, when Laura's husband Dan, gives Laura roses, Laura becomes unexplainably angry and when Laura is walking downstairs to the kitchen she, "conquers her irritation at the sound of her husband's

voice, saying something to Richie about napkins' (p.43). She then describes her husband's voice as a potato being grated. This automatically shows us that she has a mental illness as mental health is more normalised. Similarly, a modern audience would react to Macbeth changeful, nihilistic character as quite normal or someone with a mental illness. Macbeth has a lot of ups and downs and at most moments does not know what he wants. One minute he felt so bad about killing Duncan, then as soon as he turned around he was ordering someone else to be murdered. Macbeth has a problem dealing with his guilt but, after sometimes for him to think about what he wants and where he feels that he should be, he's back to killing everyone that's in his way. An Elizabethan audience would think that Macbeth was evil as those who suffered from mental illness suffered because they had a "disease of the soul". Their madness supposedly stemmed from an evil within, and they thus were treated as animals.

Similarly, in 'the Hours' Richard Brown's lack of faith and feeling like a failure so he therefore commits suicide for his pain to be released. This is demonstrated when he says,: "what I wanted to do seemed simple. I wanted to create something alive and shocking enough that it could stand beside a morning in someone's life"(p.199), which implies that Richard tried to access his life's work as he feels like his work is not good enough; he feels like a failure. Also, deterioration of his mind has led him to think that his project has not succeeded. This then triggered his demise. Due to all the pain he felt mentally he felt the need to commit suicide for him to be peaceful.

Additionally, the play progresses Macbeth's sanity spirals to the point of madness. Albert Einstein's definition of insanity- "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results" clearly supports how Macbeth become mad. This is because throughout the story, Macbeth goes on to kill anyone who he believes knows that he murdered Duncan. This eventually becomes the reason for his demise In Act 3 scene 2, Macbeth says "We have scotch'd the snake, not kill'd it. She'll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice remains in danger of her former tooth" (p.65). Macbeth believes that if he finishes off the "snake," then he will be safe. This does not work; for not only does the "snake" not die, its final form grows larger and deadlier. Macbeth tries to find peace but is unable to as he fails to admit the truth about him killing Duncan therefore demonstrating how he's avoiding life. The war at Act 5 is the final form of the snake. Also, the "snake" is a reference to the snake with Adam and Eve. Macbeth believes that he will be fighting off evil with more evil. This is a one way how Shakespeare makes connections to real life.

Lady Macbeth heavily overcome by madness. Her threshold to insanity starts at Act 1 Scene 5, where she gives a monologue about how she wants spirits to "unsex me here and fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full of direst cruelty!" (p.42-44) Seeing how madness back then was defined as some possessed by a demonic power, Lady Macbeth would undoubtedly be classified as "mad". The spirits she talks to this scene refers to a demon of some sorts. Through this scene, the audience discovers that not only does Lady Macbeth become possessed by a "demon," she craves it. She also mentions,: "Take my milk for gall", suggesting that her womanhood, represented by breasts and milk, usually symbols of nurture, impedes her from performing acts of violence and cruelty, which she associates with manliness. This further demonstrates her madness as, as a woman she's supposed to evoke a motherly behaviour; she meant to be kind, nurturing, loving but she's the complete opposite- nihilistic, sinister, sadistic.

Mental illness is not viewed as an illness in 'Macbeth' but rather a punishment for wrong-

doing. Critics of ‘Macbeth’ believed that mental illness was a punishment from God. David Lederer mentions that physicians were influenced by religion in their diagnose of madness “until the mid-seventeenth century” (10), but most common people still believed in the supernatural causes for a much longer time. Michael MacDonald (174) states that they “readily blamed the Devil and his minions, demons and witches, for madness”. Neely believed that “performed madness continues not just to elicit attention and compassion but is potentially transgressive through unsettling production, adaptations, or indecorous interventions by actors that highlight the social critique in the tragedies (67)”. Mental illness in ‘Macbeth’ is not depicted as an illness rather it is viewed as a punishment for wrong- doing. Whereas, in the ‘Hours’ mental illness is viewed as being normal as it was much more acceptable.

Overall, mental health plays a vital role in the play Macbeth as well as in the novel The Hours. Mental health is the cause for most of the deaths in both texts which emphasises the impact it can have on an individual. The theme of madness helped to reveal to readers the development of both the characters through the development of both the characters with conflicts with themselves.